

# EXPLORATIONS

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Salt and scandal in the Gospels

MARSHALL MCLUHAN & JOSEPH KEOGH

The Buddhist Fade-out in Eliot and Hesse

JITENDRA KUMAR

biafra

ELIZABETH MCL.

Information Systems and their Users

GORDON B. THOMPSON

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## Salt and scandal in the Gospels

**42** *And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.*

**43** *And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched.*

**44** *Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched*

**45** *And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched:*

**46** *Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched*

Mark IX, 42–50.

McLuhan:

Discussing this passage with my friend, Joseph Keogh of the Illinois Institute of Technology, led to a consideration of the relation of 'offend' to the Greek **skandalon** ('a trap laid for an enemy: – a stumbling-block, offense, scandal') of which it is the common translation.

The Greek idea of scandal is to create pitfalls or booby-traps. This appears very obviously in the gospel of Matthew XVI, verse 23 when Christ tells Peter: 'Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offense unto me.' Here the word 'offense' is once again **skandalon**, or booby-trap, and the best place for booby-traps is certainly behind rather than in front of the pedestrian. In terms of the offense, or scandal, or pitfall frequently charged them with. All the actions of the body as externalized created by the members of the body, it may well be helpful to consider them not so much **as the body**, as the **extensions** of the body or its actions. Thus the scribes and Pharisees created many offenses for the eye and spirit of man by their manipulation of the scriptures, a matter that Christ in human arts and services are as prone to create disservices (scandals) as services.

Having discussed this aspect of scandal (which incidentally is the sense in which the term is used by Sheridan in **The School for Scandal**), I suggested to Mr. Keogh that verses 49 and 50 of Mark IX were loaded with resonating puns on the word **alas**. The word 'salt' (**alas**) is inseparable from 'fire' in this context:

**47** *And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire:*

**48** *Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.*

**49** *For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt.*

**50** *Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltiness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another.*

Keogh:

Your *alas* passage in Mark IX is very interesting; I wonder whether anyone has ever really understood it, though. I looked up the Greek too, and I discover that it's all based on *SAUSAGES* – shades of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Eliot's *Cariolan*. The Greek word for sausage is *allas*, not surprisingly, since all sausages were preserved with salt, and *preservation* is the whole key to the passage. I'm not sure that *SALvation* and the whole sequence of Latin words concerning health, hospitality and wholeness may not be directly related, too; at any rate, the Latin word for sausage is, like the Greek, related to the word for salt: *sal*, *salsisium*, and if you want to stretch a point, *salami*.

Now for the interpretation: I don't recall anyone having made it before. In the context of hospitality (the sharing of salt) and receiving children and men in Christ's name, we get this strange passage with two kinds of death (water and fire) and two kinds of fire (the destructive and the preserving). The water death by drowning involves the sea (salty) and the death or torture by fire involves Gehenna, Jerusalem's famous garbage pit, where I believe the corpses of executed criminals were thrown to burn. Gehenna may also appear as the 'valley of death'. The associations of Sodom and Gomorrah, traditionally

located under the salty Dead Sea (pillar of salt, etc., fire and brimstone) would certainly not be irrelevant to this passage.

You have all the facts, so you've probably already guessed the rest. 'Salted with fire' are the tribulations of life which harden a man, and enable him to endure, just as sausage meat is salted and then generally smoked. In the absence of this preservation, the meat will corrupt and become subject to worms, finally being tossed into the continually smouldering pile of garbage in Gehenna.

Since the text of Mark is poor, and loaded with Aramaicisms, it wouldn't surprise me if the Greek line *kalon to alas* should really read *allas*, giving a much more sensible reading: 'Sausage is good, but if the salt has no saltiness, what will you season it with?' Seasoning a piece of salt is a rather odd procedure. The reference to having salt in yourselves, and being at peace, obviously continues the chain of associations in the direction of hospitality, and the covenants of peace common during sacrificial meals. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* suggest this old custom may have derived from the preserving qualities of salt in the first place; i.e. salt as a symbol (not of wit or wisdom, as in Latin) of *faith* and perseverance.

Since the preceding is a meditation on faith, and the consequences of scandalizing children who have it, the symbolism of salt provides a peculiarly appropriate conclusion.

(E.B. suggests that the "salt without savor" refers to the very common practice, due to salt taxes, of adulterating salt with other common earths like chalk.) Here I suppose enters in your own message, the adulteration of faith and traditional values due to new media and new technologies – which is, after all, the whole theme of *The Waste Land*, is it not? One can't help feeling that one of the reasons that Mr. Eliot's 'land' is so sterile is that it has been 'sown with salt' (a very Waste Land metaphor) as a result of technological and media fallout.

'*als*' is another common Greek word for 'salt', in fact the commonest; it is also Homer's standard term for 'sea'. Salt was a staple trade item of Phoenicians, in addition to their famous salt-fish; some places even used it as money and a medium of exchange. In the ancient world salt was produced exclusively from the sea. Hence that the apostles were fishers of men, and meant to trade for souls to the far corners of the earth (cf. salt for the

earth, *alas tē gē*. 'If the sea loses its salt, how will it be salted?' This interpretation would also fit in with previous contexts, like the millstone and the sea. Sea is source of all salt, just as apostles source of all faith.

*To Carthage then I came  
Burning burning burning burning*

The above lines sound very much like Eliot is visiting his big city shortly after it had been burned and sacked by the Romans, and its fields sown with salt. To quote the gangster tactics of Cato, perhaps not named Marcus Porcius for nothing, a seething cauldron of passion, is for Eliot and purgatorial fire. But I don't suppose I could very rationally relate this to the salt and fire of the Mark gospel without embarking on an artistic career of my own. As to people who cast off exegeses in his name? 'Os gar ouk estin cath' ēmōn, 'uper ēmōn estin.

Father Terence Forrestall, scripture scholar at St. Basil's Seminary notes:

On the salt passages, the play on words and the puns are certainly there in the text of Mk 9,50 and the association with the fire of sacrifice in Mk 9,49 and the references to Gehenna in the preceding verses. This punning is nevertheless the work of the evangelist because Christ would have spoken Aramaic where such punning is impossible with reference to salt (*melach*). The word for sausage does not appear in the Hebrew OT or in the NT, so if the ambiguity is there it must have arisen in a Greek-speaking community. Compare Mk 9,50c with Colossians 4,6.

In the OT note the following texts:

Salt and sacrifice – Leviticus 2,13, 24,7 (Hebrew has incense offered by fire with bread as a memorial; Greek translation, incense and salt offered but drops fire). Ezra 6,9, 7,22 (?), Ezekiel 43,24.

Punishment, esp. re Lot's wife, Sodom: Genesis 19,26; Deuteronomy 29,25, Wisdom 10,7, Ezekiel 47,11, Judges 9,45.

Hospitality, health, salvation – 2 Kings 3,19–22, Job 6,6, Sirach 39,26, Ezekiel 16,4 (cf. Mk 9,50c and Col 4,6).

Covenant of salt – Numbers 18,19, 2 chronicles 13,5.

Note the context in which these OT texts occur. Any possibility of a further play with Greek *alloso* to change!

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## The Buddhist Fade-out in Eliot and Hesse

*O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,  
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall  
as you.*

*The Waste Land, IV*

*And do not think of the fruit of action.  
Fare forward.*

*O voyagers, O seamen,  
You who come to port, and you whose bodies  
Will suffer the trial and judgement of the sea,  
Or whatever event, this is your real destination.  
So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna  
Not fare well,  
But fare forward, voyagers.*

*—The Dry Salvages, III*

In Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, the death-by-water episode, thematically as well as structurally, serves to highlight the shift from the Buddhist to the Hindu view of life. Siddhartha's time with Kamala, the courtesan, symbolic of the world of the senses, comes to a despairing end, even as his flirtations with asceticism had earlier ended in dejection. Asceticism had failed him in his confrontation with the 'Other' and sensuality fails him in his confrontation with Time. Both Siddhartha and Kamala are overcome by fears of age, decline and death. Leaving the pregnant Kamala behind, Siddhartha is once again drawn to the river which he had crossed to get away from asceticism and the doctrine of Gotama, the Buddha. He sits under a tree and contemplates suicide – death-by-water. However, as he looks into the water and sees his own image, he spits on his reflected face. In a 'flash' he realizes the truth which had evaded him in his wayward pursuit of it: the Buddhist distinction between *Samsara* and *Nirvana*, the categorical distinction between the world of time and the timeless, is itself a great illusion and so cannot help overcome other illusions. Or to put it positively and in Eliot's words: 'Only through time time is conquered.'

The lines from *The Waste Land* quoted above are from the section entitled 'Death By Water' and not only do they evoke a similar mood as we experience in the scene of Siddhartha's contemplated suicide but they also obviously parallel the legend of the Lord Buddha's renunciation. As a youthful prince, brought up within the confines of a pleasure-palace, he had never known the world outside his palace. On three successive occasions when he made excursions to the outskirts of the town, he met with sights which were in utter contrast to the setting of his perennially youthful pleasure-palace, situated in Kapil Vasu: on his first visit, he saw a man shrieking with pain, on his second visit, he saw an old man bent with age and on his third visit, he saw a dead man being carried to the burning ghats. The prince became aware that he too was subject to disease, decay and death. Time will spare no one. That temporality was a dire condition of human existence filled him with doubt as to the established structure and codes of human society. He renounced his kingdom and secretly passed out of the gates of the palace, leaving behind, his young wife, a new-born son and his old father stricken with grief of separation. He went out to search for that secret that would free man from the clutches of time. To that end, he fasted and did penance and finally, seated under the famous Bo-tree, he saw the Light and arrived at the conclusion that it was "desire" which bound man to Time. If he ceased to desire things of the temporal world, time would be helpless to torture the human soul. The Buddha (One who has found wisdom) gave this conclusion an intellectual and abstract form, known as the Four Truths and the Eight-fold Path. The recognition of the Four Truths and pursuit of the Eight-fold Path would lead one to *Nirvana*, freedom from the temporal process of *Samsara*, he thought.

In fact, the Buddha had not discovered anything which did not already exist in the Hindu view of life. But he certainly introduced a formula for *Nirvana* which could be practised on a mass scale. While Hinduism had no promised gift to offer for an organized society and left each individual to find his own *Nirvana* and his own mode of *Nirvana*, Buddhism offered an amazingly simplified way to spiritual salvation. This simplification has always been the reason for a first-sight appeal of Buddhism to confused minds, ever since the Buddha started preaching his sermons. A Harvard professor has described Buddhism, very understandably, as *cosmos*, comparing it to Hinduism which according to him is *chaos*. Hinduism does not prescribe any method. For,

self-realisation need not be a separate activity from the mode of life one has chosen for oneself. Self-realisation is possible in whatever role one is cast in life. A detached, desireless action performed on any level is a way to self-realisation. A Brahmin, through meditation and detached pursuit of knowledge, a Kashtriya, through detached action on the battlefield, if necessary, and by performing his administrative duties, is seeking self-realisation as much as playing a role in his world. And this freedom of modes of self-realisation is not confined to the traditional caste-roles. An artist, for example, by pursuing his art in a detached manner seeks self-realisation. In fact, this belief and practice has invariably inspired many great Indian musicians, including modern composers Ali Akbar Khan, Naushad and Ravi Shankar. So also in Eliot's *Four Quartets*: 'History is now and England,' and 'With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling'. When this point is fully grasped, the reason why Buddhism could not flourish on its native soil and has exercised significantly less influence on the culture of India than foreign religions like Christianity and Islam, is not far to seek. Also, this point could throw some light on the phenomenon of Buddhistic atmosphere in Western literature in the 1920's.

There are two very obvious reasons for Western thinkers' attraction toward Buddhism. Like Christianity and Islam, Buddhism is a historical religion. They all trace their origin to a particular moment in human history. And like other historical religions, Buddhism serves the needs of an organized society. Most Western writers have based their Thought on historical-universal assumptions; Hinduism does not place great reliance on the historical and Hindu Thought invariably assumes an individual-universal base. A pattern related to the historical mode of comprehension is the chronological apprehension of time. Simultaneity and totality of temporal experience, rather than time sequence and chronological arrangements of events, are major assumptions behind the Hindu perception of time. That is why, while objectivity is accepted as a cardinal virtue in Western thinking, in Hindu thinking it is detachment (involved observation, roughly speaking) which is prized the most. Objectivity suggests a vantage point outside the orbit of a process; detachment signifies a point at the very centre of the process. A detached viewer is so fully involved and fully aware of all aspects of what is taking place around him that he is incapable of taking note of only one or the other

aspect. He must relate rather than objectively separate aspects of his experience for a fuller understanding.

To bring these rather refracted generalisations to specific focii, we may turn to the works of two very important writers of our time, T. S. Eliot and Hermann Hesse.

In a letter dated March 13, 1922, Eliot wrote to Hesse:

... .Pendant un voyage récent dans la Suisse, j'ai fait la connaissance de votre 'Blick ins Chaos', pour lequel j'ai concu une grande admiration. Je trouve votre 'Blick ins Chaos' d'un sérieux qui n'est pas encore arrivé en Angleterre, et je voudrais en répandre la réputation ...

Eliot is also known to have made a pilgrimage to Montagnola to meet Hesse, in May 1922. This was the time when Hesse had completed his final revision of *Siddhartha* and Eliot had sent the blue-pencilled manuscript of *The Waste Land* to the press.

The early interpreters of Hesse were entrapped by the title of the novel. *Siddhartha* was also the name of Gotama, before he became the Buddha. They took the novel as a reconstruction of the story of the Buddha. The vogue of Existentialism further helped them get deeper into the trap. As a matter of fact, there is a point of irony involved in the interchangeability of the words 'Buddha' (One who has *gained* wisdom or *acquired* wisdom or has *become* wise) and 'Siddhartha' (One who has *sought*) in as much as Siddhartha, according to the story told in the novel by Hesse, actually refuses to follow the Buddha and, in fact, leaves him behind. In choosing the Hindu name of the Buddha, as was given to him by his parents, Hesse knew what he was doing and tells us so in his own words:

*Only recently have I been approaching the actual religious India of the gods, of Vishnu and Indra, Brahma and Krishna. And now Buddhism appears to be more and more as a kind of very pure, highly-bred reformation – a purification and spiritualization that has no flaw but its great zealousness, with which it destroys image-worlds for which it can offer no replacement.*

(Coronoa, 3, 1932)

In Hinduism, the emphasis is on *seeking*, not on *finding*.

Buddhism, like Existentialism in our own day, was born out of despair and disillusionment. The difference, however, was that in the case of the Buddha it was a disillusionment of a personal nature; in the case of the Existentialists it was a disillusionment caused by the industrial-urban environment or of historical nature. This point provides us with a key for comparing *The Waste Land* with *Four Quartets*. *The Waste Land* is a great historical poem which assumes a historical-universal base. The Unity of World Culture is invoked through the images and the stumps of Time. Whether it is the mythic figure of Tiresias, or the picture of the Unreal City, or the spectre of the sunken Ganga and the black clouds gathered over Himavant, the landscape of *The Waste Land* remains enveloped in a mood of Buddhistic disillusionment: burning, burning, burning, burning. *The Waste Land*, not very unlike Buddhism, makes a moral judgement upon the historical state of the world:

*Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water  
If there were water we should stop and drink  
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand  
If there were only water amongst the rock  
Dead mountain mouth of carius teeth that cannot spit  
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
There is not even silence in the mountains  
But dry sterile thunder without rain  
There is not even solitude in the mountains  
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
From doors of mudcracked houses*

*If there were water*

And the spiritual answer to the historical attrition of *The Waste Land* is appropriately couched in ethical terms: 'Datta' (give), 'Dayadhvam' (sympathize), and 'Damyata' (control).

*Four quartets*, mainly written during the Second World War, are permeated with the spirit of 'SHANTIH SHANTIH SHANTIH' and Eliot had no need of spelling the word out as he did in *The Waste Land*. And Lord Buddha of *The Waste Land* yields place to Lord Krishna in the *Quartets*. Not that Eliot's concern with history has ceased; rather history has become part of a timeless pattern. Self-realisation excludes nothing; it demands total awareness.

*Quick now, here, now, always –  
 A condition of complete simplicity  
 (Costing not less than everything)  
 And all shall be well and  
 All manner of thing shall be well  
 When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
 Into the crowned knot of fire  
 And the fire and the rose are one.*

The pragmatic and Buddhistic categories of *Samsara* and *Nirvana* have been overcome and the merger of *Atma* (finite soul or self) with *Paratma* (the infinite soul) in the eternal moment of Now, the merger of the temporal and the timeless, the only condition which the Hindu view of life deems as necessary and essential, has been sought:

*The river is within us, the sea is all about us;  
 The sea is the land's edge also, the granite  
 Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses  
 Its hints of earlier and other creation:  
 The sea has many voices,  
 Many gods and many voices.*

**biafra**

**chop gently as you kill  
for think of all the blood that you might spill  
upon your spotless hands  
chop gently**

**kill extra if you must, but not too few  
your customers are pleased with what you do  
and they all want their policies renewed  
kill extra**

**starve quiet when not fed  
for the faintest cry of pain might wake the dead  
or stir the living  
starve quiet**

**no matter what you see, be silent  
it's not life but only news that's really violent  
or so the hangman said  
be silent**

ELIZABETH MCL.

February 28, 1969

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## Information Systems and their users

The success of any scientific information service will ultimately have to be measured in terms of its effectiveness in permitting a greater and more significant contribution from our scientific community to our total economy. Technological invention and innovation are the greatest wealth producers we know. For this service to be significant, it must increase the rate at which this invention and innovation occurs. The following outlines a few points aimed at causing such an increase.

As McLuhan has pointed out in *Understanding Media*, the style of a society is to a large degree a function of that society's communications environment. Five hundred years of print technology have left a definite imprint on our society's style. According to his thesis the past predominance of linear connectedness, classification, fragmentation and repeatability is the result of this exposure. It seems reasonable to assume that the communications environment fashioned by any significant scientific information service will have an effect on the style of its user population. This effect will be a function of the communications history of the population including the everyday communications environment, and the actual system itself. At this stage, one point is abundantly clear, and that is a mere document retrieval system, highly organized and structured, will do little to encourage the technological transfer process required to achieve any significant improvement in the rate of invention and discovery, particularly for the younger members of the user population.

Fortunately, there exists a time lag between the period when an individual's communications preferences are established in his early years, and the period when he might be using the proposed scientific information service. If we assume the system is designed to suit the needs of the younger scientists, perhaps in their twenties, a period during which they hopefully will make their maximum contribution of discovery, then there exists a decade or so to permit the evolution of the system to suit the communication mores of the oncoming users. There may, in fact, be an even larger gap if we associate one set of communications mores with our professional activities, and another set with our non-professional activities. Adherence to this straw could produce a situation where the system user might be more creative in his non-professional life than

he is in his professional one; a situation that we should try to avoid, but unfortunately one that apparently exists today.

As an example of the things we are discussing, consider the grade school classroom as a communications environment. The classical layout involved seats all in a row with the teacher separated from the students, standing aloof at the front of the room, pacing the activities of the class to suit her needs. On the other hand, the discovery oriented version is far noisier, and involves groupings and regroupings of students actively involved in the process of learning. The former style is characteristic of highly visual societies, while the latter represents a more aural sensory profile. Inasmuch as the scientific information service being considered today is for the youth of today to use when they enter the professional scientific world tomorrow, consideration must be given to eventually matching this more aural style of discovery, involvement and almost disorganized appearance.

The actual indexing words and classification categories used are vitally significant, for they will determine the direction and level of discovery attributable to the system by controlling the cross-associations so essential to discovery. Innovation and invention, which are our real wealth producers, are dependent upon our ability to manage ignorance as a resource; and rigid, content oriented indexing systems may seriously limit our ability to manage this resource optimally. This is the difference between matching the old, and making the new.

Any system to be effective must be used, and the effect of this must be that increasing amounts of information must be processed by the actual users. Whether computers are used, or modern communications techniques, or even the common mail system, there remains the user with his limited channel capacity. The following few paragraphs deal with this problem, and are applicable to a wide range of futuribles.

In his interesting book, *A Communications Model of Urban Growth*, R. L. Meier points out the essential need for a society to preserve its information. He states that it is the information flows that are important, and the entombing of information is useless, except perhaps as an art form. Difficulties arise when the amount of stored information becomes so large that much of it remains unaccessed because of the channel limitations on the part of the users. Three solution areas seem open to forestall this inevitable overload condition: stricter editing, computer assisted browsing with abstracts, and improved man-

system interfaces that increase the man-book data speeds of a few hundred words per minute.

Editing must play a part, however the bias of the editing can preclude much of the potential of the system in terms of its ability to create wealth through discovery, and so a limit exists on the usefulness of this technique. Certainly computer assisted searching through the use of adaptive browse programs that sense the interest profile of the user, creates a new dimension of utility. The costs of developing such sophisticated programs are enormous, as are the costs of classifying the data with the required mathematical precision so that usefulness probabilities can be calculated for each user-document combination. This solution may be viable at some future date when more is known about the theory of information systems.

The third area of lessening the overload on the user involves improving the man-system interface languages, or developing reading techniques in the user population to permit the handling of greater volumes of current language data without an increase in user stress. Both lines of attack have their peculiar advantages, the former being easier to read, while the latter is easier to prepare. An example of the former, or language, technique is the superb single concept film put out by the National Film Board on the Pythagorean Theorem, *Pythagoras*. This iconic style of presentation is well suited to the trends apparent in our population at large, and perhaps this technique should be used for the more heavily used basic material. The other half of this solution set involves the notion of speed assimilation, a technique that has become increasingly significant. High school-aged students have a high probability of attaining 'reading' speeds of upwards of ten thousand words per minute in high school level technical material. Whether or not these speeds can be maintained on teletype copy where the type face is far from pleasing is unknown, as is how such readers would interface with an electronic display. As yet this subject is receiving only mild recognition by the research community, and yet this solution area may turn out to be the most significant factor in any future system.

The actual input/output coupling means employed, be it teletype, CRT, Xerox, etc., will have a profound effect on the user. Experts in the field of education research in the U.S. today say that the first reasonably satisfactory solution to this problem has yet to be conceived. In the face of this situation, one would expect to see meaningful systems in the near future employing

multi-mode terminals where perhaps the teletype might handle requests, abstracts, commands and some of the inputting, while Xerography and the common mails might be employed for longer and more complete packages.

In conclusion, one should note that the major communications revolutions of the past, the development of the phonetic alphabet, the printing press with moveable type, etc., have all increased the *ease* with which stored human experience could be accessed. For any system to be significant it must make a quantum jump in increasing the *ease* with which it permits the meaningful accessing of its contents. To the extent that the experience of using the system is pleasurable, as well as effective (which also has connotations of pleasure), the system will be successful. The system must be easy to use, and it must be fun.

GORDON B. THOMPSON  
Northern Electric Co. Ltd., Ottawa